

Obfuscation of Multidimensionality: Analyzing the Emphasis on Suffering and Victimhood in the Portrayal of Trans Women in *Ram c/o Anandhi*.

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Abstract

This study critiques Ram c/o Anandhi for its one-dimensional portrayal of trans women, particularly the character Malli, who is cast primarily in the mould of suffering and victimhood. Drawing insights from queer theory, the study highlights how literature often reinforces stereotypes rather than offer nuanced representations. The novel presents trans women as figures of violence, social rejection or tragedy, limiting their agency and humanity. The protagonist's interactions with Malli suggest that trans individuals require validation or protection from cisgender, heterosexual figures to find meaning, reinforcing problematic power dynamics. The narrative's emphasis on transgender individuals' suffering without challenging societal structures inadvertently upholds mainstream biases. The study argues that literature must move beyond victim narratives and offer empowering portrayals of trans lives, challenge heteronormative structures rather than reinforce them.

Ram c/o Anandhi, the novel by Akhil P. Dharmajan, published in 2020, was a phenomenal success thanks to various reasons including the dexterous employment of social media platforms for its advertisement, totaling a whooping sale of over 2,00,000 copies. The novel was taken up by young readers across Kerala and was celebrated as a contemporary literary piece that enshrines the perspectives of educated cosmopolitan youth. The novel has a spectrum of thematic concerns including interpersonal relations among youth, transgender identity issues and international political developments. What this paper tries to unravel is the politics of the treatment of transgender individuals in the

novel which passes rather unobtrusively with the help of queer theory which has “the potential to transform normative (taken-for-granted) assumptions, and have been widely used to challenge assumptions about sexuality and gender (Katherine Johnson). The novel clandestinely normalizes heteronormativity though it appears to problematize the case of sexual minorities.

Despite being a novel of this era, the writer's thought process reflects historically dominant social frameworks. When a work assumes such a position, it often tends to marginalize or oversimplify minority groups. In the case of trans women, this frequently leads to

portrayals shaped by stereotypes or voyeuristic curiosity rather than nuanced understanding. They are repeatedly depicted as victims of societal oppression, violence, or rejection (Evje). While this partially reflect real challenges, it ultimately confines their representation to narratives of despair, limiting the scope of their agency and visibility. When trans women are portrayed as victims in the novel, it reinforces stereotypes and makes them seem permanent. Focusing on their suffering strengthens the idea that they are either helpless or tragic figures, reducing their identity and humanity to their struggles. Even when they are shown as overcoming hardships, it is often within the limits of these same stereotypes. As McLaren states, "complex representation" that transcends just superficial representation of transgender people is necessary to shatter the stereotypes (12).

The suffering of transgender people is caused by society. There is a scene in the novel where the protagonist encounters a trans person who introduces herself as 'Aravani'. The protagonist, who has come from Kerala, only knows that it is a derogatory term and does not know that it is a word used to refer to transgender people. He also says that in Kerala he has not seen transgender people. Here, the writer leads the readers to the notion that there is 'no' transgender community in Kerala." In Part 5, 'Malli' is portrayed as harassing the protagonist and snatching money from his pocket. However, the protagonist initially grabbed Malli's hand and twisted it, which led to Malli's reaction. Despite this, the writer does not emphasize with the protagonist's initial action. Instead, the narrative focuses on Malli's response without acknowledging that she did so in reaction to physical aggression. This omission subtly shifts the reader's perception, reinforcing a portrayal of transgender individuals as inherently violent. He represents trans women as aggressive. Later, without even asking what had happened, the police officer brutally beats Malli. Normally, if a fight or scuffle breaks out, the police would first investigate the cause of the conflict. However, in this case, there is no such inquiry, no consideration of basic human dignity. Transgender people still face substantial discrimination and threats to their health and

wellbeing (Lancet). When transgender characters are included solely to highlight issues like discrimination, rather than being given authentic representation, their presence ends up serving as a tool for the narrative's moral or social critique. In Part 6, there is a situation where Anandi hits Ram, but Ram does not retaliate. His friend tells him that it is good he did not react and even suggests that women receive special consideration because Jayalalithaa is the Chief Minister. However, the harsh reality is that there is no legal protection for transgender women to defend against those who harass them. Similarly, in Kerala, if a woman is insulted or harassed, society collectively reacts against it. But when obscene words and comments are directed at transgender individuals, it does not receive the same response. They are not even given basic human consideration. Just as society ignores transgender people, literature too portrays them through the same lens of suffering, placing them only on the path of criticism rather than meaningful representation. Here, the writer fails to provide a space where transgender individuals are accepted and where solutions to their struggles are explored.

In Part 7, Malli thrusts a metal tin into Ram's hand. She follows him up to the college courtyard but does not enter the college. From this, it is evident that education is forbidden for them. The only places where they have space are on the outskirts, railway stations, and inside the trains. In all other places, they are forced to exist under the dominance of the mainstream society. In Part 9, at Ram's insistence, Malli goes with him to a clothing store to buy a new shirt to replace the torn one. Malli endures the mockery of the people in the store. However, as she steps out of the shop, she feels as if she has regained her freedom. Most people would experience freedom when stepping into society. But for Malli, it is just the reverse, that she loses her freedom in the presence of others. It is society that stigmatizes transgender individuals and pushes them into the margins (Verbeek). Ram and Malli are both 23 years old. But here, Ram represents the hopes of his family. He is chasing dreams and expectations, while people like Malli, with no hopes left, are pushed to the streets, becoming victims of society's mockery and lustful gazes.

This is the vast world of those who have stepped onto the streets to live without a home or the support of family. They are not even given the consideration even animals receive. Yet, despite the hardships, transgender individuals continue to push forward and in recent years they gain success in different areas of life. Instead of further weakening them, society must stand with them and help them move ahead. Later, when explaining why Malli harassed Ram, the writer suggests that it was due to her past traumatic experience with her bearded former lover. Since Ram also has a beard, Malli reacted in a similar way. However, this reasoning creates confusion for the reader. It raises the problematic implication that transgender identity might be linked to mental illness, which can lead to general misunderstandings and misconceptions.

In Part 12, Malli shares her childhood memories to Ram. She reveals that her birth name was Kalidas. Even as a child, she had to endure abuse from her father's friends. The writer suggests that this abuse happened before Kalidas even realized she was a transgender, introducing an element of gay sexuality into the narrative. Rejected by society, Kalidas found refuge in temples, where she began performing in feminine attire. In this context, Hinduism appears as a religion that acknowledges transgender individuals, providing a space where many like her can exist. However, as her younger brother grew up and became socially aware, he struggled to accept Kalidas's gender identity. His inability to accept her was shaped by societal influences. This highlights the responsibility of society to change and guide future generations toward understanding. Only through such transformation can transgender individuals achieve true empowerment. In this novel, the writer gives great importance to family. He presents home as a safer space compared to a big metropolis like Chennai. However, this may not be true for everyone. Malli had traumatic experiences in her own home, suffering abuse from her father's friends during childhood. Yet, the writer subtly implies that home is still the safest place for her. But a place without love and protection is not a *home* it is just a *house*, a mere structure. The true *home* is wherever we find safety and care. In Part 24, Malli writes her name next to Ram's on the bench where he usually sits,

using a marker pen. She then shows it to him and says, "*Let me at least claim a place beside this name on a cement bench*" (page 199). Malli's seemingly simple act of writing her name next to Ram's on their shared bench carries a powerful symbolic weight, especially when viewed through the lens of societal exclusion faced by transgender individuals. Her statement becomes a poignant cry for recognition and belonging. In a world that often denies transgender people a rightful place, Malli's gesture becomes an assertion of her existence and her right to occupy space. The bench, a mundane object, transforms into a symbol of the societal structures that often marginalize and erase transgender identities. By inscribing her name alongside Ram's, she is not just claiming a physical spot; she is claiming a place in the narrative, in the community, and in the world. It is a quiet rebellion against the systemic denial of dignity and rights, a demand to be seen and acknowledged. Just as everyone deserves a place to sit, to rest, to exist without question, Malli's action underscores the fundamental human right of transgender individuals to live with dignity and claim their rightful position in society. It is a reminder that even small acts of self-assertion can be powerful tools in the fight for equality and inclusion. It is a reminder that transgender people are not asking for special treatment they are simply asking for the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. This scene in Part 24 serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle for transgender rights and the importance of creating a world where everyone feels a sense of belonging and acceptance. The writer's perspective might have been rooted in the limitations and prejudices of the time, it is important to analyze it critically in light of evolving understandings of gender and relationships.

The writer's portrayal of marriage as "unattainable" for Malli reflects the historical and often ongoing exclusion of transgender individuals from mainstream societal institutions like marriage. This perspective likely stems from a time when legal and social frameworks were rigidly defined by a binary understanding of gender, leaving little room for those who identify outside of those norms. In this context, Malli's act of symbolically "joining" Ram

by writing her name next to his on the bench can be interpreted as a poignant expression of longing for a connection that society deems impossible for her. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this perspective is not only limiting but also potentially harmful. It reinforces the idea that transgender individuals are somehow "less than" or incapable of forming meaningful relationships, including marriage. This is simply not true. Transgenders are just as capable of love, commitment, and building families as anyone else. Recent years have seen significant progress in the fight for transgender rights, including the right to marry. Legal frameworks in many countries are slowly evolving to recognize and protect the rights of transgender individuals to marry and form families. This progress is a testament to the tireless advocacy of LGBTQ+ activists and the growing understanding of gender diversity.

The writer's assertion that Malli only experiences a sense of purpose when accompanied by Ram raises a complex and potentially problematic question about the autonomy and agency of transgender individuals. It suggests a dependency on a cisgender, heterosexual figure for validation and a sense of direction, which risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes and undermining the idea of transgender self-determination. The idea that transgender individuals need the support of a heterosexual person to live freely and purposefully is inherently flawed. It implies that their existence and well-being are contingent upon the approval and presence of someone outside their community, reinforcing the notion that transgender lives are somehow incomplete or invalid without such validation. This is simply not true. Transgender individuals are capable of living full, meaningful, and purposeful lives independently, within their own communities, and on their own terms. Their sense of purpose should not be defined by their proximity to or relationship with cisgender individuals. The narrative's focus on Malli's experiences with Ram, while potentially intended to highlight the challenges she faces in a transphobic society, could inadvertently reinforce the "transgender person needs a cisgender savior" trope. This trope is harmful because it devalues the agency and resilience of transgender individuals and

minimizes the importance of their own support networks and communities. Transgender people find strength, purpose, and belonging within their own communities, through shared experiences and mutual support. These connections are vital and should not be overshadowed by narratives that center on the relationship with a cisgender ally.

Furthermore, suggesting that Malli's purpose is solely derived from her connection to Ram ignores the multitude of other factors that can contribute to a person's sense of purpose, such as their career, passions, activism, artistic expression, or community involvement. To reduce Malli's existence to her relationship with Ram is a disservice to her complexity as a character and a reflection of a limited understanding of transgender experiences. It is crucial to recognize that transgender individuals are diverse and have their own unique paths to finding purpose and fulfillment. While supportive relationships with cisgender allies can be valuable, they are not a prerequisite for a meaningful life. The narrative should strive to portray transgender individuals as autonomous agents capable of defining their own identities, pursuing their own goals, and finding purpose within themselves and their own communities.

The writer suggests that Malli experiences a sense of purpose only when she is with Ram, a heterosexual man, whether on a train, in a store, or walking through the streets. This raises a critical question: Does a transgender individual require the support of a heterosexual person to live freely and find meaning? The implication reinforces a problematic narrative where trans individuals are dependent on cisgender, heterosexual validation for agency and fulfillment. This perspective risks undermining their autonomy and strength, ignoring the ways in which trans people carve out purposeful lives on their own terms. In most writings, authors tend to portray the main characters as embodiments of goodness. A similar approach is evident in this novel, where the author presents the central character, Ram, in a predominantly positive light. The narrative shapes Ram as a figure of virtue, highlighting his moral qualities and sympathetic nature. This technique not only influences how readers perceive the character but also reinforces a particular perspective on

the story's themes and conflicts. Malli's love for Ram is expressed through subtle gestures, and when he finally understands her feelings, he embraces her. However, his reaction takes a significant turn when he begins calling her 'Kalidas' a name that shifts the way he perceives her. In one instance, Ram tells to Anandi that "Kalidas is now dead and that only Malli is alive" (199). It may seem like he is recognizing her true self. Yet, by continuing to use the name Kalidas, he places her in a separate category one that acknowledges her existence but denies her womanhood. This reflects a deeper, heteronormative perspective of writer. Ram sees Malli as different, as someone outside the framework of conventional womanhood. Rather than accepting her as a woman and a potential romantic partner, he reaffirms her transgender identity in a way that distances her from him. This mirrors the broader societal tendency, shaped by cisgender attitudes, to recognize transgender individuals but refuse to grant them full acceptance, especially in matters of love and partnership. Ram, as a symbol of society, sets the terms of her identity, reinforcing the idea that transgender women can be acknowledged but not truly seen as equals in relationships.

The idea of next birth is entirely imaginary, yet the writer reinforces this belief when Ram tells Malli, "If you are born as a child, I will protect you without letting even a scratch touch you"(my trans. 200). However, even in this imagined rebirth Malli is denied the right to be a part of society and live freely. Every living being on this earth has the right to live with freedom, and no human needs another to act as their shield. Through Ram's words, the idea emerges that for a transgender person to move forward in life, they require the protection of a heterosexual individual. This reflects a patronizing mindset, suggesting that trans individuals can only exist safely under the care of cisgender, heterosexual people. However, what transgender individuals truly need is not protection, but the same freedom and opportunities as everyone else. It is not about providing a shield but about ensuring equal rights and the freedom to live and work without barriers. In essence, what Ram offers is not true acceptance but a form of conditional inclusion, where Malli is acknowledged but not truly given the space to exist on her own terms.

We see Malli as someone who suffers at the hands of society. Later, the writer portrays her as a rape victim. In contrast, the novel's female protagonist, Anandi, is called to the godown by S.I. Farooq, but before any harm can come to her, Ram, Vetri, Reshma, and others rush to protect her. Malli, who once resisted by pulling her hand away from Ram on the train, is later shown as someone who has lost all ability to fight back. The novel's narrative suggests that transgender individuals are destined to endure sexual violence, reinforcing a harmful stereotype. Meanwhile, the virginity of the female protagonist is given great importance, as multiple characters intervene to protect her from harm. This contrast highlights how the writer's perspective treats trans women's suffering as inevitable while upholding the purity and protection of cisgender women, reflecting deep-seated biases about gender and violence.

The novel reinforces a one-dimensional representation of suffering and victimhood of transgender people. While the protagonist's acceptance of Malli/Kalidas might be seen as progressive, the narrative doesn't challenge societal norms or explore the complexities of transgender experience beyond pain. Instead, it allows the protagonist to be perceived as benevolent simply for acknowledging Malli's existence. The novel, by not actively dismantling the trope of transgenders' suffering, inadvertently caters to the reader's existing biases rather than challenging them. While the inclusion of a transgender character is a step, the failure to move beyond familiar tropes of victimhood ultimately reinforces the status quo and misses an opportunity to offer a more nuanced and empowering representation. The narrative, therefore, risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes even with seemingly positive gestures. The writer's reliance on familiar tropes of trans suffering can reinforce existing prejudices in the reader's mind. It can solidify the idea that being transgender is inherently tragic, rather than challenging those assumptions. Literature has the power to shape societal perceptions. By not offering a more nuanced and empowering representation of transgender experience, the writer misses an opportunity to educate readers and promote greater understanding and acceptance. This critique

highlights the importance of thoughtful and nuanced representation of transgender characters in literature. It emphasizes that simply including a trans person in a story is not enough. The narrative must move beyond simplistic portrayals of victimhood and challenge societal norms to create meaningful change.

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